

A Well Deserved Championship for the Dominican Republic

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Many times when people from Europe or other non-baseball playing countries have commented how strange it is that Americans love baseball while "the rest of the world plays soccer," I have tried to explain that many countries play baseball. After listing off the countries where baseball is popular, I usually conclude by telling people that the country with the best baseball in the world is not the U.S., but the Dominican Republic.

There is, of course, no way to conclusively prove this one way or another, but on a rainy Tuesday night in San Francisco, a Dominican team with a middle infield and bullpen that would be the envy of most big league clubs made a pretty strong argument in favor of this point. The Dominican team capped off the World Baseball Classic (WBC), in which they went 8-0, by defeating Puerto Rico 3-0. The game, however, was not as close as the score. The Dominicans scored two runs in the bottom of the first on a big double by Edwin Encarnacion following a poorly thought out intentional walk to Robinson Cano. After that, the Dominicans seemed completely in charge. Relievers Octavio Dotel, Pedro Strop, Santiago Casilla and Fernando Rodney shortened the game for the Dominican team as they combined for four innings of shutout relief.

This victory was a significant achievement for the Dominican Republic, a country where baseball is hugely important. The Dominican team had not played well in either of the two previous WBCs. In 2009, they were eliminated after losing twice in one week to the Netherlands in what only could have been seen as a national embarrassment in the Dominican Republic. This year, the Dominicans have nothing to be embarrassed about.

The last two rounds of the WBC were played in AT&T Park, home of the World Series champion San Francisco Giants and possibly the best place in the U.S. to see a baseball game. The last game had a strange quality to it as there is not a big Puerto Rican or Dominican population in the Bay Area. The ballpark felt like a bit of New York City, home to enormous Dominican and Puerto Rican populations had temporarily resettled to China Basin. The rain didn't help either as the stadium felt half empty by game time and perhaps a third full when the last out was made.

The Giants have built a great team in recent years, with some valuable Dominican players. Last year they shared the same setup man as the Dominican team and supporting players like Melky Cabrera, Joaquin Arias and Francisco Peguero from last year's team were Dominican, but there are no big Dominican stars on this team which boasts an MVP from the U.S., a World Series MVP from Venezuela, a closer who pitched for Mexico in the WBC, and a leadoff hitting centerfielder who played the same role for the Puerto Rican team that finished second in the WBC.

The Giants, however, have strong ties to the Dominican Republic, so it was somehow fitting, or at least noteworthy, that the Dominican team made their claim to being the best baseball country

in the world in the ballpark of the team that in the early 1960s was the first to recognize the quality of baseball in the Dominican Republic and to aggressively sign players from there. It should not be forgotten that there was also a racial dynamic to this at the time as a number of these players were dark skinned at a time when much of America was still living under apartheid conditions. The three Alou brothers, Jesus, Felipe and Matty, were among the best known of this group which also includes players like Manny Mota.

Of course, the most famous and important Dominican player in Giants history, as well as in the early history of Dominicans in the big leagues, was Juan Marichal, a statue of whom (with Marichal's famous high leg kick) can be seen outside of AT&T Park. Marichal, known during his career as the Dominican Dandy, was one of the best pitchers in the game for many years and the first, and thus far only, Dominican elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Marichal, despite six 20-win seasons and a career ERA of 2.89, never won a Cy Young award while playing. This is largely due to a combination of bad luck and having a career peak that overlapped with that of Bob Gibson and Sandy Koufax. When Pedro Martinez won his first Cy Young Award, the first by a Dominican, in 1997, he presented it to Marichal.

It is hard to imagine baseball over the last half century without the contributions of people like Marichal, the Alou brothers, Tony Fernandez, Joaquin Andujar, Jose Reyes, Robinson Cano and so many others. The Dominican team was the class of this competitive tournament and have earned the right to call themselves the best baseball players in the world, for now.